

## The Big Bang

ROBERTO G. FERNÁNDEZ

Joey slowly opened one of his dilated jaundiced eyes, arched his thick black eyebrows and felt his nostrils twitching. At the foot of the bed, his wife, Maravillas, and his daughter Bella held vigil.

Joey focused on Bella's long wavy hair, which catapulted from her well-fed face. He craned, and Bella's countenance came into view. He tried to wave, but could not raise his arm. It was weighed down with the plastic tubes that brought him nourishment and delivered the ammunition which helped in the battle against the armies of invading microbes, posed to take over the strategic command posts within his body.

"He is waking up!" shouted Bella as her overabundant flesh moved from side to side with the excitement.

"Joey, don't move your arms!" yelled Maravillas. "And don't touch the tubes in your nose. Those make sure your stomach doesn't digest itself."

"Daddy, those gross tubes remove the bad gastric juices," Bella added, trying to outdo her mother.

Joey tilted his head slightly and closed his eyes in an effort to remember why he was there. He only recalled being in the process of filling his car with cheap Premium at Costco, and then a warm liquid flowing down his thighs.

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Roberto G. Fernández is the most important Cuban-American fiction writer of his generation. He has authored, among other works, *La vida es un special \$1.50 .\$.75*, *La montaña rusa*, *Raining Backwards*, *Holy Radishes!*, *En la Ocho y la Doce*, *Entre dos aguas* and, most recently, *El príncipe y la bella cubana: los amores de don Alfonso de Borbón y Battenberg y doña Edelmira Sampedro y Robato*. "The Big Bang" is a new unpublished short story.

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"The surgeon removed two feet and three and one quarter inches from your lower colon. Dr. Serge said it had so many perforations it looked like a sieve. A few more inches and you would have ended up with an artificial anus till death did you apart," said Maravillas, tightening her belt around her waspy waist at the same time that a strange smirk crooked her thin lips. "I have forbidden all calls to this room, but I'm keeping your snooping cousins posted on your progress through text messages, the best invention ever to keep nosy people at bay. And before I forget, Father Cloonan is coming to see you today. He was so nice to skip his lunch hour and administer you the holy oils when you were on the verge of death. Thank him, Joey. The good Father gave such an inspirational moving sermon last Sunday. He said that the most convincing proof that there is evil lurking on this earth is the advent of computer viruses. He is a visionary, a man for all seasons."

"That priest is so weird!" Blurted Bella. "And with that disgusting smell of incense that drives me crazy!"

"Miss Bella Marie, stop disrespecting him! Here have my cell and call that good for nothing lazy Puerto Rican boyfriend of yours to keep you entertained."

"He has a name. His name is Palomino, and he is not Puerto Rican. He is Mexican, and he is not lazy. He just hurt his back playing soccer."

"That was two years ago. And stop distracting me. I have important matters to talk to your father about." Maravillas ran her fingers through her cropped auburn hair, revealing a smudge of gray by her widow's peak.

Bella began to sing as she dialed Palomino.

"He doesn't answer. I'm bored. I'm hungry."

"Bella Marie, stop it!" Maravillas brow wrinkled upward and she pursed her lips.

"Yes, ma'am," Bella said sarcastically.

"Joey, Joey."

"He's asleep, mom. The man had an operation. Can't you see he's still tired?"

"Dr. Serge said we should keep him alert. Joey, Joey. Wake up! Joey Bernard, wake up!"

Joey opened his one working eye.

"There are a number of papers that need your signature. I'll bring them this afternoon. There is the bid on the house on Weeping Willow Way, the application for the mortgage, and the life insurance beneficiary forms. We need to have all these papers in order just in case you have a relapse. One must be prepared. And then the air conditioner's condenser sprung a leak and we have to replace it or buy a new unit. And there's the financial application for Bella's teeth, braces and retainers. Don't

complain! She inherited those crooked teeth from your side of the family. And I'm just mentioning a few. There are plenty more." Maravillas rolled her eyes.

"How long have I been here?" asked Joey, struggling to pronounce each syllable.

"Three weeks. Exactly three week," Bella rushed to answer.

"Yes, three long weeks, and your operation was three days ago," added Maravillas. "You were too weak to have it before. You hemorrhaged a lot. Five pints of blood were needed. And you need to pass gas as soon as possible. The minute it happens, the tubes come off your nose and finally I can go home and relax from this ordeal."

Joey felt the pressure to perform and became anxious.

"But don't you worry about a thing, baby. We have a lot of people praying for you. Father Cloonan spoke to Bishop Delany, who has sent an urgent message to the Holy See requesting the Holy Father to pray for your passing. The bishop says Francis will be sympathetic to his request since he suffers from flatulence."

Joey didn't quite understand what the Vatican had to do with his emission. He closed his yellow-green eye, felt an excruciating pain on his lower abdomen, as his wandering fingers found the patient control analgesia pump and pressed the blue button that delivered relief. It was then that his mind began to wander, seeking a particular pleasant image, like an old jukebox searching for a long forgotten song.

*It was at the mixer of the 20<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Plantain Chip Institute in New Orleans that they met. It was after the mixer that Joey and Virginia walked hand in hand by the river shore. Night had fallen and they took off their clothes. Embracing, Joey and Virginia dipped into the warm waters of the Mississippi as the moonlight shone on the two entwined bodies. The rustling waves quieted when they kissed for the first time, their soft red tongues undulating forward. That starry night they knew each other. But Joey grew restless under the covers and called Maravillas from the hotel room. It was Bella's tenth birthday. Virginia sensed the danger of remorse and cupped his jewels. As Joey was telling Maravillas how much he missed her, Virginia's skilled hands were decoupling and moving up.*

"You have to try harder to pass that gas. Make an effort, honey." Maravillas used warm sounding sounds, the voice of a temptress.

Joey awoke from his reverie, thinking that Maravillas had walked into the hotel room and began to tremble violently, the tremors of a cheater.

"Bella, quickly. Call the nurse. Don't just stand there. Your father is going into convulsions. Look at his face flinching!"

Then Joey realized he had been in a dream state, and he crumpled his face in pain to make sure his wife kept focusing on his convulsion. Joey feared that his thoughts could percolate into external reality.

A few minutes later, the Filipino nurse's aide appeared. He took Joey's vital signs and wrote the information on a notepad with the face of Jennifer Lopez on the top left corner. The head nurse had refused once more to tend to Joey. He had a very long nostril hair, which coiled around the nasal gastric tube that went from his left nostril to his stomach. The first time Nurse Rosenberg saw it, she rushed out of the room and threw up on the nurses' station counter. She had asked several times for Agapito, her aide, to grasp the offending hair between his index and thumb and pluck it out. The aid had ignored her request. Agapito enjoyed the visit to the room to watch the nervous woman with the tiny waist. He knew that if he plucked the hair, he would no longer relish the enticing sight, because Nurse Rosenberg would take over.

"Any complications?" inquired Maravillas.

"The shakes are normal. It's a good sign that the stomach is beginning to do its job." Then the aide leaned and lifted the bandages. "The wound is healing nicely. None of the fifty-two stitches are infected. But you need to relax. A walk through the park across the street would renew your energies. I'm going there myself at the end of my shift at two o'clock. The caretaker needs to be taken care of."

Agapito smiled and slightly wet his upper lip with the tip of his tongue, then winked and bumped against the bed as he left the room.

"Did you hear that, Joey?" Maravillas smiled for the first time.

*Joey didn't answer. He was back with Virginia. This time on the Delta Queen, gliding down the river. Joey and Virginia were letting the good times roll. They had entered the cabin and began to dance to the faint rhythms of the jazz band playing in the front deck. Virginia had untied her long red hair, which cascaded down her freckled back. It was Joey's lucky day and Virginia began to undress him garment by garment. Then she led him to bed, and a still dressed Virginia offered him her left foot and Joey began to nibble at her thin toes. She giggled and then offered him her right foot and Joey began to gently suck her toes, but this time starting with her little toe. Ginger undressed and began to ascend through Joey's flushed flabby body and coiled on his torso. He felt her warm, humid open sex sticking to his left thigh like a remora fish as the smell of shrimp Creole permeated the air. Time was measured in glistening sweat drops, and Ginger scattered her red mane behind the pillow and told Joey: "Devour me like a ripe mango." After a soothing shower they walked to the stern of the ship. Virginia wore her black sequined evening gown. They kissed, and she asked him to throw his wedding band where the paddles were churning. Joey hesitated, but Ginger insisted: "Being married is worse than death itself." Joey took the ring off and dropped it into the muddy waters.*

"I'm going to let you doze off this time, but the doctor has given strict orders not to let you sleep too much. He wants you to be alert and on your feet by tomorrow. It will help you with the fucking fart!" Maravillas was losing her patience.

"Mom!"

"And now I'm going to take a walk in the park." Maravillas sounded determined.

"I can't stay either," said Bella. "I promised Palomino I was going to eat pizza with him."

"You're staying put, young lady. And I don't want to hear another peep from you. Someone has to be here with your father, and I need to clear my head."

"This sucks! If Palomino leaves me I will kill myself and it would be all your fault." Bella started to sob.

"I hope he does!" Maravillas replied.

"I hate you!"

"And now I'm leaving. Keep an eye on your dad. He needs to be alert to sign the papers."

"Could you at least leave your cell so I can call him?"

"Here, but be brief. I only have a few minutes left on this month's plan."

"I love you, Mom!"

A week had elapsed since the invasive procedure, and still there was no sign of the primordial gas. Maravillas's two o'clock walk in the park had become part of her hospital routine and she no longer complained about being away from home. Though the urge had come many times, Joey held tight and his stomach had swollen like a pork belly. The tubes were still in place, and Virginia came regularly to visit him. Francis had called his bishop, telling him to urge Joey to try harder, that the whole world knew he had prayed for him and that his reputation was at stake. But Joey would not budge, he knew the day he farted the tubes would be removed and he would have to go back to Maravillas.

Today Virginia had promised him to take him to the hilt of pleasure. Joey eagerly searched for the patient's control analgesia pump and pushed the blue button. On the other side, she was zestfully waiting for him, though for Joey the pressure was mounting and the urge grew stronger and stronger.

*They were now on a hill overlooking a plantation and a pristine creek was flowing down the cotton fields. Joey embraced Ginger and caressed her hair. She sensed something dreary. The sky above them had turned dark gray and full of clouds. There were leaps of lightning. She asked him what was wrong. Joey responded that they didn't have much time together. Virginia sobbed, thinking that he didn't want to be with her any longer. Joey vowed*

*that he would never leave her, and then the deafening sound of a loud thunderbolt muted their voices.*

And it was then that Joey tightened with all his strength, all his might, but it happened. The nurses rushed in when they heard the blast and in Vatican City the bells of St. Peter started to toll.